

Critique of Political Organisation: Introduction to *riff-raff* #7

The best points in my book are: 1. (this is fundamental to all understanding of the facts) the *two-fold character of labour* according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value, which is brought out in the very *First Chapter*; 2. the treatment of *surplus-value regardless of its particular forms* as profit, interest, ground rent, etc. (Marx to Engels, August 24, 1867)¹

The question of the relations of communists to the capitalist society, and even more so to the class they claim to be the social force that constitute the real movement of communism, is central to every “political” context—party, organisation, collective and journal. Perhaps even more so for a “theoretical” journal, such as the *riff-raff*, that from bourgeoisie (in the widest sense of the word) standards at first glance seems to have least of immediate *raison d’être*, and in the end merely is the non-successful result of the capitalist division of labour. In our last issue (#6 summer 2004) we tried to start localising ourselves—for us, and for our readers—with the help of the concept of “practical reflexivity”² (guided by Marx’s first thesis on Feuerbach and the British Marxist R. Gunn³). With our seventh issue, we have set out to continue this effort of localisation—why we have called this issue’s theme “Critique of Political Organisation”.

The question (and critique) of political organisation is closely connected to the question of class consciousness and its genesis. The “obligatory point of departure” we have set out in determining the communist movement/the class consciousness is the *critical determination* of Marx’s work with political economy, with its “double character as a theory of real abstraction and as a critique of the forms of reified consciousness”. Since, like we wrote in our last issue, the concepts of bourgeoisie economy (and philosophy, politics, etc.) are “not just any produced categories to deliberately obscure the capitalist process of production as a process of exploitation, but ‘objective forms of thought’”.⁴ From this *critique* we may abstract “the fundamental categories of political theory, of the theory of classes and of the theory of the state” (Marramao, “The Theory of Crisis and the Problem of Constitution”), and with this as its base—a theory of organisation.

Ever since the days of Marx himself the question of Marx’s method of scientific work has been central to the labour movement. Not as a question of method in itself, but for the implications it gives to the interpretation of Marx’s critique of the political economy.

In our last issue, with the help of *Aufheben*, we tried to discuss the subtitle to Marx’s *magnum opus*, i.e. the critique of political economy, and in so emphasising its critical program. As a critique of political economy (*qua* ‘economy’), and not a new “proletarian economy”, we put the Marxian theory in the context which Marx placed himself and his work in, i.e. capitalism and the movement of its overthrow (communism). Thus we rejected any specific Marxian theory of crisis (nor any Marxian economy in general, nor a Marxian philosophy, history, sociology, etc.), even if the presence of crisis of course is a moment in Marx’s overarching theory. He spent time with German philosophy in the morning, British political economy in the afternoon, and French socialism in the evening, at his own discretion, without ever becoming either German philosopher, British economist, or French socialist.

Thus the question of levels of abstraction and mode of presentation is central to understand both capitalism and Marx. The work of inquiry (*Forschung*) and presentation (*Darstellung*) is a relation we must keep in mind when we study, measure and draw revolutionary conclusions from Marx’s critique of political economy... Marx himself was clear on this point:

In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both. (Marx, *Capital* vol. I, Preface to the First German Edition)

Since:

... all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided. (Marx, *Capital* vol. III)

¹ Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Progress, Moscow 1965, p. 192

² See riff-raff #6 (summer 2004), “Past Decline and Beyond: Introduction” <www.riff-raff.se/en/>

³ We use the expression as it appear in his “Against Historical Materialism: Marxism as a First-Order Discourse” in *Open Marxism* vol. II, Pluto Press, London 2002.

⁴ Cf. perhaps the most central passage of *Capital* at the end of its first chapter, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof”.

Thus,

... the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development, to trace out their inner connexion. Only after this work is done, can the actual movement be adequately described. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is ideally reflected as in a mirror, then it may appear as if we had before us a mere a priori construction. (Marx, *Capital* vol. I)

The Marxian question of method is thoroughly discussed by G. Marramao in his “The Theory of Crisis and the Problem of Constitution”⁵. The immediate link to the discussion in our last issue is that Marramao connects the question of method on the one hand to the discussion on capitalist crises and the collapse/finitude of capitalism in and around the council communist movement (primarily by Pannekoek, Korsch and Mattick) and on the other hand one of the main characters in what has come to be called Autonomist Marxism, Raniero Panzieri, and the alleged “putting Marx on his feet”, i.e. the claim to change theoretical focus from “capital” to “the working class”. This “back to the working class”, however, is paradoxically, since it at the same time guides the way to a real understanding of the antagonistic capital relation *qua* class struggle, but in the end “the one who wants to have too much, often loses it all”, like so many others before and after, “in misinterpreting the significance and the function of the representation”. Marx himself wrote to Engels, after having explained the aimed outlines of vols. II and III of *Capital*, that at the end, “we have the class struggle, as the conclusion in which the movement and disintegration of the whole shit resolves itself.”⁶ *Nota bene*, at the end of *Capital* (as an “artistic whole”). It is this paradox that makes Panzieri line up with Korsch and Pannekoek at the dead-end of “subjectivism”. At this point Marramao claims that the parias of the Marxist theorists, Mattick and Grossmann, in their theorisation are closer both to Marx *and* to the real conditions. But at the same time as they succeed in tracing the genesis of class consciousness in the capitalist relations of (re-) production, and that it is presented theoretically in the critique of political economy, they reduce their theory of revolution and consciousness to be the “Siamese twin” of the capitalist “economic crises”, which lead them to an “objectivist and mechanical reduction of the problem of constitution”. Rather their theoretical merits appear “*ex negativo*” compared to Korsch and Pannekoek (and Panzieri).

In his text on democracy, “Democracy as the Community of Capital”, Leo Björk starts, for us, a new discussion on a communist perspective on bourgeoisie democracy. It is loosely based on the Antagonism Press pamphlet, *Bordiga versus Pannekoek*, which we have translated into Swedish and are going to publish later this year.

Class struggle, by many socialists, is seen as a struggle for power. But what power?, LB asks. Too often as a formal power, that in itself “mystifies the proletarians’ real conditions of existence”, where struggle is “reduced to a fight of principles” with a perspective of power over economy or politics. But “the proletarians’ real situation” shows us that struggle is about the *power* over our “*life-activity*” and not about some juridical, moral or metaphysic individual freedom. Democracy, as an expression of the class relations of capitalism, rests on the division of labour between decision and execution, between those who decide and those who execute what is decided. So “against democratism and self-managementism we therefore must understand communism not as the extension of democracy to economy, but as the *abolition of both* as we know them today”. As an “appendix” to the text on democracy we have translated (for the first time in Swedish) Bordiga’s 1920 text “Seize Power or Seize the Factory?” (from *Il Soviet*, February 20, 1920).

In different forms and with different names the demand for a “guaranteed income” is raised by various Leftists and environmentalists *et al.* Wildcat (Germany) wrote about and criticised this in their 1999 “Reforming the Welfare State in Order to Save Capitalism” that appeared in the pamphlet *Stop the Clock!* by Wildcat, Mouvement Communiste, Aufheben and Precari-Nati as a contribution to a collective international discussion on the reformation of the capitalist welfare state.

We are also happy to introduce, for the first time in Swedish, a translation of Marx’s 1844 “Critical Notes on ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian’” from *Vorwärts!*. It is, like so many texts by Marx and Engels, disregarded by all—tendentious—translations and selections in Swedish hitherto. This text, among other things, discusses issues related to both LB and Wildcat when it comes to an economic and/or a political *versus* a social revolution—for Marx, this time, in relation to the insurrection of the Silesian weavers at the beginning of the 1840s: “Every revolution dissolves the *old order*

⁵ We have translated it from the English version in *Telos* #26, Winter 1975–76. The text though originally was published in Italian in *Critica Marxista* #2–3, 1975.

⁶ Marx to Engels, April 30, 1868, p. 208.

of society; to that extent it is *social*. Every revolution brings down the *old ruling power*; to that extent it is political. ... All revolution—the overthrow of the existing ruling power and the dissolution of the old order—is a political act. But without revolution, socialism cannot be made possible. It stands in need of this political act just as it stands in need of destruction and dissolution. But as soon as its organising functions begin and its goal, its soul emerges, socialism throws its political mask aside.”

This time we have a more overtly polemical section, starting with J. Kellstadt’s critique of the text “Give up Activism” that, for example, appeared in *Do or Die?* and *Collective Action Notes* a couple of years ago, and was translated into Swedish by an Autonomist reading group in Stockholm. It is called “The Necessity and Impossibility of Anti-Activism”. The primal critique in it is that the cure for “activism” in the end is a idealistic and moral individual “giving up” of the activist role, without realising the role of the “activist”, like other “roles”, in the capitalist society. It also criticises the text by C. Price from the same issue of CAN, “Fragile Prosperity? Fragile Social Peace?” that we published in the first issue of *riff-raff*. Just like Kellstadt we hope that Price in the future will acknowledge also his own (theoretical) practice in producing a communist journal as part of his list of (more “workerist”) examples of adequate practices.

Perhaps the most devastating theoretical cluster-bomb this time is written by a member of the editorial board, the thrilling “Communism of Attack, and Communism of Withdrawal”. The text has sparked off a lot of discussion within the editorial board. However, we have to say that the text—for the moment—do not represent the entire editorial board, which is why we have published it in the (more) polemical section of the issue. This is not to say that we do not agree with any aspect of the text. On the contrary, some parts of it reflect very well the positions of *riff-raff*, and still some more than so. Certain—and fundamental to that—aspects, however, makes us want to publish it as a polemical contribution to our theory production. See it as a reflection of our notion of theory as dynamic elaborations of the contradictory “real movement”.

The red thread throughout the essay is the relation between theory and practice, “that is, the organisational implications of communist theory”. The implications appear in the effort to *specify the movement of communisation* in its (schematically) two aspects: communisation as an “internal movement in the class struggle” and as an “external dimension”. These aspects are produced by “different forms of practices”, even if they are tied together. The former must be “developed and advanced” before the latter can be expressed. The transition between the two aspects is the transition from a “negative critique of capital to creative critique, i.e. the constitution of non-mercantile relations”. “The internal movement against capital is the capital-negating tendencies in the actual class struggle, and the external dimension is the spaces where other relations than the capitalist are being produced”.

The points where the most obvious divergences appeared were the disputation against “the mythology of Marxism about the proletariat”, i.e. what we in our last issue discussed as communism being “the result of an internal contradiction in the capital relation”, as *Aufhebung*, as “teleology”, etc. The divergences were about whether this dispute actually contradicted what we said in the Introduction to the last issue or if it on the contrary was implicit in our notion that even if communism is not the goal for capitalism, capitalism nevertheless is a precondition for communism.

In this issue we also publish an excerpt from a correspondence between parts of the editorial board and Gilles Dauvé, mainly about the discussion between *Aufheben* and *Théorie Communiste* in the last three issues of the former.

When it comes to the “political” implications of the discussions this time we will continue keeping our eyes on “commons”, workfare/the new welfare model, the “other” workers’ movement, informal workplace struggle, and theories of the “social factory”. Globally, perhaps the most urgent issue is coming to grips with the class composition in Asia with its sparkling upheavals spreading through the old Stalinist Eastern bloc, for example in Kyrgyzstan. But also its neighbour, the rapidly growing accumulation giant, China, provide us with a clandestine workers’ movement in being. According to *The New York Times* no less than 60.000 riots occurred in China only during the last year. The situation is brought to a head. All independent workers’ organisations are struck by repression, including assassinations. Kyrgyzstan is facing a permanent curfew and protests were drained in blood in the city of Andizjan, where hundreds of civilians have been massacred and many more have disappeared

Loren Goldner⁷ makes the analysis that China is facing a situation similar to that in Russia during the decades prior to 1917, with the possibility of an uprising evolving to a proletarian revolution (the same estimation Marx did of the 1848 Germany). In any case, the Asian drama is an issue we have all reasons to return to. The last days we have been reached by

⁷ China in the Contemporary World Dynamic of Accumulation and Class Struggle: A Challenge for the Radical Left, at *Break Their Haughty Power* <<http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/china.html>>

the signs of an upcoming trade war between China and the US, on the one side, and China and the EU, on the other. The US is facing an all time low trade deficit to China (approximately USD 125 billions), that might get even worse due to the quotas on textiles that were abandoned at the end of last year. Now there is a growing concern among the American industry and Union movement that the American market will be flooded by strategic Chinese goods, such as steel, cars, etc. The pressure is increasing for the US Congress, and Bush has explained to China that its low valued currency is a threat to the free world trade—and warns them, in the name of the free trade, to reinstate the quotas for the textiles import, if China will not revalue.

The same lament for the free trade has made the EU threaten China that also they will reinstate the import quotas for t-shirts and linens (the vanguard nations for this brand of free trade are primarily Portugal, Greece and Slovenia).

We may, once again, refer to the old Marxian beard:

But, in general, the protective system of our day is conservative, while the free trade system is destructive. It breaks up old nationalities and pushes the antagonism of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the extreme point. In a word, the free trade system hastens the social revolution. It is in this revolutionary sense alone, gentlemen, that I vote in favor of free trade. (Marx, “Speech on the Question of Free Trade”, 1848)

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